

Title: Mystery of Numbers

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The Mystery
of Numbers,
an Inquiry Into
Mathematics
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It is in common things,
not the weighty
considerations of scholarly
pursuits, that the origin
of mathematics are to be
found. The need to make
records for trade, for
understanding the
movements of the heavens
and the weather that
numbers and calculations
arose. But sometime
after those first clever
men created the numbers
system, a different breed
of men used the numbers
for purposes they were
not intended for. These
men were the first
mathematicians, and they
took the numbers and
used them for their own
sake, performing for the
first time calculations
that had no reference to
the physical world--
instead of counting sheep
or debts, they were
counting pure number. And
in this exercise, the
mathematicians noticed
certain patterns abounded,
and that in some sense
the numbers seemed to
live a life of their own,
following their own
system of rules and
relationships just as man
and society has his own
rules and society. But

these rules seem to us as foreign and arbitrary as the rules of some lost, distant society whose aims we can only guess at. Why should the hypotenuse of a right triangle always equal the root of the sum of the squares of the other two sides? It has been proven thus, but there is no sense in it, and the more the scholar considers it, the more he is confronted with the idea of the mystery of numbers. For some mathematicians, in love with their work more than with the rest of the world as such, posit that these odd rules of the world of number can yet have meaning to men, and that their mysteries offer us a higher form of truth, if only we can decode it. And so they seek relationships between the world physical and the world mathematical, hoping to somehow ferret out the code key that will allow them to decipher the higher meanings behind the mathematical formulae they work with. The question I pose in this work is thus: is there any merit to the idea that wisdom can be found in the mystery of numbers? Can we reap any insights from this peculiar sort of science? Sadly, the answer to both questions is no.

Mathematics is a wonderful science, but it is and must always be at its heart a practical one, practiced for the benefit of mankind. Indeed, it is through the proper application of mathematical principles

that we have made recent advances in architecture and astronomy, among other like achievements. But humankind as a race is too apt to elevate the practical to the level of the profound, and too likely to see patterns where none truly exist.

One interesting thing about mathematics is that it contains no human assumptions other than the relationships of the numbers as we define them, i.e. that three preceeds four, which preceeds five, etc. Thus, all the mathematical relationships which the learned men study descend simply from the tautological relationships as defined. Like a great knot of string, all of mathematics can be distilled back to its essential relationships, where $1 + 1 = 2$. But no matter how complex a knot may be, it is still nothing more than a string, and though we may marvel at the complexities of the knot, or its aesthetic characteristics, it would be foolish to assign to it any higher meanings, simply because its true nature is not immediately apparent. Likewise with mathematics, let us be amazed by the intricacies of its strange ways, but let us use them to elevate mankind and serve the Virtues, rather than worshipping them like some awestruck peasant.